



REVIEW ESSAY

Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes

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Confusion and contradiction mark understandings of feminism in US popular culture at the turn of the 21st century. Surveying the terrain of both feminist theory and popular discussions of feminism, we seem to have entered an alternate language universe where words can simultaneously connote a meaning and its opposite, where labels are more significant than theory behind the label. This is the contemporary theoretical context in which scholars deliberate feminism, anti-feminism, postfeminism, third-wave feminism, women-of-color feminism, and power feminism, to name but a few. Although not new formations, second-wave feminist perspectives, such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, and socialist or Marxist feminism, persist as well. Variant uses of the same term, sometimes as a result of the national context of the writer, further confound contemporary confusion about what the term feminism means and its many modifiers indicate.¹ Members of the academy and activist organizations mainly debate the complexity of the contemporary profusion of feminist perspectives, although popular media also address the general public with some of these permutations of feminism, such as a reference to postfeminism on the dramatic teen television series *Dawson's Creek* or in a *People* magazine article. These media outlets are able to distribute their messages widely, but rarely acknowledge the significance of invoking a term such as postfeminism or describe its meaning to readers unfamiliar with theoretical debates. Such confusion over terminology may signify one of the key obstacles facing feminist advances at the dawn of the 21st century, but despite terminological confusion, feminism remains a vital perspective for recognizing and addressing contemporary oppressions and inequities (see Sarah Gamble 1999).

This theoretical confusion over what one means when invoking the term feminism results mainly from evolution in the theoretical perspectives and the lived experiences of women since the height of second-wave feminism. Such change and development is only to be expected. For feminist media scholars, not only have the theories changed, but so too have the objects of study. For many years academic analyses of feminist representations focused on the "new woman" character type, with US critics commenting most expansively upon Mary Richards of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. But feminist critics writing on the television characters and programs emerging at the end of the 1990s need new tools and perspectives to explain US television phenomena such as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–), *Ally McBeal* (1997–), *Sex in the*

City, (1998–), *Any Day Now* (1998–), *Felicity* (1998–), *Charmed* (1998–), *Providence* (1999–), *Judging Amy* (1999–), *Once & Again* (1999–), *Family Law* (1999–), and *Strong Medicine* (2000–).² Many of these series arguably introduce feminist characters who are “new, new women” in comparison with their predecessors. Elyce Rae Helford acknowledges the complexity required of criticism exploring many of these series, noting that “the late ‘90s offered some of the most developed and compelling (if contradictory and sometimes even reactionary) televisual representations of gender politics and debates over (and within) feminism” (2000a: 6).

Theory produced as part of third-wave feminism and identified as “postfeminism” can provide a useful theoretical framework for understanding discourse in contemporary series, some recent character representations, and the corresponding cultural atmosphere.³ However, understandings of postfeminism are highly contested and even oppositional. Authors use “postfeminism” to explain contemporary gender politics in both critical academic essays and in popular magazines such as *People* and *Time*. Conversations about both third-wave feminism and postfeminism remain difficult due to the lack of shared understanding of what the terms delineate, so that the terms are largely useless unless the user first states his or her definition. The lack of shared understandings of postfeminism is of particular concern to media scholars because media criticism provides some of the most expansive theoretical explorations of postfeminism. Scholars often use the term to demarcate changes in representations of women and feminist discourses (in lieu of unwieldy descriptors such as new, new women); however, uniform agreement about what shifts have occurred and their contribution to women’s empowerment remain contested.

This article surveys the varied applications of postfeminism in recent media scholarship and considers the utility of reclaiming the term as a descriptor that delineates recent developments in feminist theory and representations, instead of its more negative connotation. Before focusing on postfeminism, I briefly review the trajectory of feminist forms in US television and explore the varied ways US scholarship has studied feminist representations and discourses as they appear on television. I then catalog the oppositional definitions of postfeminism used by media scholars in the past decade, explore a contradictory definition that constructs postfeminism as a “mature” and still political feminism, and consider the application of this understanding of postfeminism to media criticism (Ann Brooks 1997: 1). Postfeminism can be an extremely valuable descriptor for recognizing and analyzing recent shifts in female representations and ideas about feminism if we establish an awareness of its various uses.

Televising feminism

US feminist criticism has been much more prolific in assessing representations of women on television than in considering discourse explicitly connected to feminism, likely a result of the relatively new phenomenon of raising ideas easily identifiable as feminist in television texts. Television programs exhibiting discourses intended as feminist first appeared only 30 years ago and even then did so cautiously, often veiling the politics of feminism by representing the “new woman,” a construct connected with both commercialism and feminism.⁴

Julie D’Acci argues a number of factors that occurred in the 1970s contributed

to making white, middle-class women an even more desirable demographic to advertisers than they had been previously, the foremost being advertiser's discovery of "working women" (1994: 67). Although women had always been the primary target audience of television advertisers because of their perceived influence on most household buying, their importance increased when many upper-middle-class women entered the workforce, and as result of economic and technological changes occurring in the 1970s and 1980s (Jackie Byars and Eileen R. Meehan 1994). Advertisers believed these career women controlled much of their disposable income, and had more disposable income to spend than housewives (D'Acci 1994: 67). Similarly, Lauren Rabinovitz argues that feminist programming emerged in the 1970s because "it was good business" as a result of the organization of new marketing data into a greater number of demographic categories, and what she recognizes as the simultaneous coming-of-age of "a more independently minded female generation" (1999: 145). The cultural engagement of the 1970s with women's liberation suggested to advertisers that programming targeting the most desirable audience—upscale, career women—could be inscribed with more liberal discourses and representations than had previously been associated with women on television (Rabinovitz 1999: 146). Rabinovitz contends, "A generic address of 'feminism' became an important strategy because it served the needs of American television executives who could cultivate programming that could be identified with target audiences whom they wanted to measure and deliver to advertising agencies" (1999: 146). The arrival of explicit feminist discourses in sitcoms such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–1977), *Maude* (1972–1978), and *Rhoda* (1974–1978) marked the attempt to reach women experiencing changes in their economic and familial status with stories infused with consciousness-raising perspectives and lifestyle politics.

Feminist discourses on television tend to correspond to aspects of feminism explored by US culture as women's roles were renegotiated, beginning with the development of the "new woman" role, defined by Robert Deming as "take-charge roles rather than [women's] usual embourgeoisied family roles" (1992: 203). Mary Richards represented a single woman as a content individual who did not need a heterosexual partner to define her identity. This was centrally connected to her status as a working woman for whom work was seen "not just as a prelude to marriage, or a substitute for it" (Bonnie J. Dow 1996: 24). Although Mary dated various men during the run of the series, she was never represented as trying to balance the demands of a relationship with her role at WJM-TV, though she was situated as both daughter and mother in the show's "family" of co-workers. The cultural context of this representation makes its significance evident. Airing from 1970 through 1977, Mary appeared at the same time as many of US second-wave feminism's most publicized efforts in the struggle for equal rights. Liberal feminism's campaign for equal treatment of women in the workforce was central to the endeavor of achieving access to all spaces of the public sector.

In the 20 years of television representation intervening between *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and the contemporary series I explore later in this article, television often used the workplace as a site for presenting and debating feminist discourses.⁵ Despite continued representational gains in depicting women in the workforce in fictional television texts throughout the 1980s, many media outlets

simultaneously circulated discourses of concern about the status of the family in a backlash against feminist advances.⁶ Anxiety-producing tropes circulated in the popular media in a hegemonic effort to retract feminist gains. Prime examples include the appearance of biological clock metaphors leading women to fear they would be unable to have families if they delayed too long, and the circulation of statistical figures reporting that women over 30 have a better chance of being killed by a terrorist than marrying, also inspiring fear among women about the possibilities of having both a professional and personal life.⁷

Mary Richards' version of the new woman continued during the 1980s and 1990s in the form of childless, single, career women, but another type of female/feminist character emerges during conservative critiques of feminism as anti-family that competes with the Richards type. This character is often described as a superwoman, capable of balancing a successful career and a conventional family life, with little redistribution of women's, or men's, traditional responsibilities within the home. Thus, the identity of this "feminist" type encompasses aspects of both home and work. Although second-wave feminists neither created nor perpetuated the idea of the superwoman as a female ideal, the superwoman character provided a response to conservatives' critiques of feminism as anti-family. Superwomen on television appeared in series blending work and family settings, depicting women as workers who effortlessly maintained families, characters appearing in series such as *Scarecrow & Mrs. King* (1983–1987), *Who's the Boss* (1984–1992), *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992), and *Growing Pains* (1985–1992).⁸ In correspondence with critiques of the superwoman ideal appearing in popular journalism and self-help literature targeted toward women, television series eventually depicted the balance of home and family as more complicated and as an ongoing process of negotiation, as seen in the upper-class contexts of series such as *thirtysomething* (1987–1991), the short-lived series version of the 1987 film *Baby Boom* (1988–1989), and in the blue-collar family in *Roseanne* (1988–1997).⁹

Related to shifts in representations of feminists and feminist gains is the unmentioned subtext of race and class. Many of the television representations of women and feminism hailed as revolutionary in relation to white, upper-middle-class characters such as Mary Richards, and later Murphy Brown, were aspects of a different history for women-of-color and working-class women. Cultural concern with the effects of women going to work only emerged when upper- and middle-class, white women began seeking careers, and backlash calls for women to return to the home were only directed toward those same privileged women, a disparity that illustrates the importance of theorizing women as a heterogeneous group.

In the period from the mid-1960s to the 1990s, the type of jobs some women held in the workforce may have changed significantly, but the change in the percentage of women in the US workforce was not as dramatic as many suspect. As early as 1965, before the beginning of an organized women's liberation movement, nearly 40% of women participated in the workforce, a percentage that only increases to the mid-50s by 1985 and to nearly 60% by 1997 (*Statistical Abstracts* 1971, 1997, 1998). The oft-blamed "women's movement," then, did not cause an enormous increase in the number of working women. Rather, the movement drew attention because of the class of women joining the workforce.

While discourses generally circulating in the culture criticized upper-middle-

class white women for going to work and leaving children in daycare, other, more demonizing public rhetoric and popular media discourses constructed working-class women, especially women-of-color, as shiftless welfare mothers abusing the benefit system. Conservatives used this construct to gain support for decreasing benefits for recipients of federal aid while calling for these mothers to go out and work (Wahneema Lubiano 1992). Although the contemporary shifts in female representations and feminist discourses do refigure issues of ethnicity in some ways, white career women still dominate contemporary representations in a way that continues the legacy of representing feminist discourse as restricted to white, upper-middle-class characters.¹⁰

Studying feminism on television

Feminist television criticism takes a variety of forms including studies of female audiences, traditionally “female” genres such as soap operas, representational strategies used in depicting women, femininity, and feminism, production histories of women in the television industry, and political economy studies of women as television consumers. In much of this work examining US television series, scholars use three main tactics in examining the ways television texts exhibit feminist ideas. Often, a focus is placed on female characters, character types, or a depiction of a character’s subjectivity, as seen in analyses of the “new woman” of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, examinations of the new woman’s development in the 1980s (Deming 1992: 204), the “unruly woman” character (Kathleen Rowe 1995), or through comparing characters with a typology of character classifications (Anne K. Kaler 1990). Another approach for considering feminist content on television examines the narrative strategies and issues present in series or episodes dealing with feminist issues. Such formal analyses have explored the relationship between feminist content and narrative organization (Judith Mayne 1997: 87), and the strategic use of narrative form, representational codes, and structures of looking in feminist texts (Danae Clark 1990). A third approach examines feminism as a theme, trope, or discourse, each a somewhat distinct focus, but similar in terms of methodology. Studies examining feminism as a theme or discourse identify trends in its representation or enumerate characteristics of the feminist ideas often found in television series. I offer a more extensive review of this third approach, first noting general discursive tendencies, then moving to a discussion of key works, because postfeminist perspectives are most usefully incorporated in this way.

Many scholars note that liberal feminism is the type of feminism most often represented in US television texts (Linda Blum 1983; Dow 1996: 13–13, 38; Lauren Rabinovitz 1989).¹¹ Valerie Bryson classifies this type of feminism theoretically as that which “concentrates on rights in the public sphere and does not analyze power relationships that may exist within the home or private life; it assumes that the justice of its cause will ensure its success and that men will have no reason to oppose it” (1992: 3).¹² Linda Blum argues that the regular representation of liberal feminism results from the importance of liberalism as a cultural discourse, while Rabinovitz contends it is because a political feminist representation must “conform to American television’s economic base” (Blum 1983: 2; Rabinovitz 1989: 3). Blum’s analysis of the made-for-television film *The Women’s Room* (an adaptation from the novel) examines the way more radical

feminist critiques are “recast by the mass media in liberal terms” that are less likely to require extensive social change. She supports this analysis through comparison of the novel’s radical discourses with the liberal discourse evident in the television adaptation (1983: 3). Rabinovitz believes the regular representation of feminism as liberal feminism undercuts the more revolutionary potential of other feminist theories. She argues, “Feminism’s capacity to disrupt and upset cultural categories has always been so ambiguously presented on television that it lends itself to a range of political interpretations ... Television allows for the expression of a feminist critique but represses feminism’s potential for radical social change” (1999: 145).¹³ Bonnie Dow adds that liberal feminism is “the version of feminism preferred and publicized by mainstream media,” and reiterates the beliefs of the other scholars by noting, “it is the easiest for television programming to incorporate because it ‘perpetuates the values of the status quo and limits the possibility of challenges to those values’” (Dow 1996: 38, citing Alison Jaggar 1983). D’Acci sees somewhat more variation, arguing three types of feminist discourse are evident in *Cagney & Lacey*, a series she notes goes “intrepidly into the territory of feminism, to a degree unmatched on prime-time” (1994: 142). She categorizes these three types of feminism as “explicit general feminism,” “women’s-issue feminism,” and “ambiguous or tacit feminism,” although each of these types are arguably consistent with liberal feminism.

Liesbet van Zoonen asserts that emphasizing rigorous adherence to theoretical classifications of feminism when studying media texts leads to multiple problems. For example, various feminist theories have different histories and associations based on national contexts and all perspectives have evolved considerably over decades of theory-building. Additionally, van Zoonen notes “many of the typologies ... are construed out of general feminist thinking and then applied to feminist media studies imposing a more or less extraneous and not always relevant order on the field” (1994: 13). This does not diminish the claim that most feminist discourse on television in the US has taken a liberal feminist form, but rather acknowledges the way intricate classification of texts and discourses into existing categories is a critical exercise of limited utility. Such labeling can be useful, however, when marking a revised or new form.

Examples of research examining feminist discourses without focusing specifically on categorizing the discourse include Jeremy Butler’s analysis of *Designing Women*, Rabinovitz’s examination of “single mom” sitcoms, and Dow’s book tracing feminist discourse longitudinally across the series *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *One Day at a Time*, *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (Jeremy Butler 1993; Dow 1996; Rabinovitz 1989). Butler examines *Designing Women* for evidence of feminist discourses, which he finds in both the dialogue and within the narrative structure. His analysis uncovers the construction of a “discursive hierarchy” in the text, which he argues allows viewers a variety of decoding positions. Rabinovitz analyzes “single mom” feminism as a representational trend, examining discourses in *Kate and Allie* and *One Day at a Time* as prototypes of the single mom sitcoms that were prevalent between 1975 and 1985. She illustrates the shift in representation across this period by comparing an episode of *One Day at a Time* from 1976 with a series of episodes of *Kate and Allie* from 1985 to 1986 that present similar themes. Lastly, by examining feminist discourse in many series, Dow argues that the shift in

feminist discourse from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *Murphy Brown* illustrates an “obsession with feminist identity” and a gradual reduction in the engagement of feminist politics. She identifies what she terms “postfeminist” discourse as discourse that increasingly defines what it means to be a feminist by factors of lifestyle and attitude rather than politics and activism (Dow 1996: 209).

In addition to surveying the various approaches used to study feminist discourse in television texts, it is also important to consider forces affecting that discourse, such as genre and social context. Dow emphasizes the way shows construct feminist discourse, evident in analysis of “the intersections of ... textual strategies—genre, plot, character development, narrative structure—with the confluence of discourses, produced by and about feminism, in the time period during which they were produced and originally received” (1996: xvi). Of these textual strategies, genre appears especially salient, with the sitcom providing the most prevalent site for finding feminist perspectives on television, as evident in the work of Patricia Mellencamp on *I Love Lucy* and *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, Kathleen Rowe’s examination of unruly women in comedy genres, and Rabinovitz’s focus on the sitcom as the “preferred fictional site for a ‘feminist’ subject position” (Patricia Mellencamp 1997; Rabinovitz 1989; Rowe 1995). Dow partially accounts for the sitcom’s primacy by acknowledging US television’s historic absence of dramas centered on female leads, a relatively unchallenged trend until the late 1990s (1996: xviii).¹⁴ Scholars generally concur that feminist discourse is predominantly found in the comedy genre because of narrative and generic qualities that both introduce and then contain potentially subversive content.

Another significant factor in representing feminist characters and their perspectives is the social context in which programming originally appears. Although many of the factors identified as leading to a focus on liberal feminist discourse have changed only slightly over the past 30 years, a range of cultural, economic, and theoretical shifts affecting feminism have occurred. Consequently, fictional television texts reflect women’s changing concerns and gains made by past feminist activism in their depictions.

Postfeminist discourse: conflicting definitions

Postfeminism is not a new term, but its use has increased significantly in the past decade. Susan Faludi dates the first use of postfeminism to the 1920s press, where it was used to note progress made by feminism in a way that indicated that feminist activism was no longer needed (Susan Faludi 1991: 50). The critical academic use of postfeminism originates in the post-second-wave era with Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey’s 1987 definition of postfeminism as demarcating “an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises, and depoliticizes many of the fundamental issues advanced by second-wave feminism” (1990: 549).¹⁵ The term began its resurgence in media scholarship in 1991, as a range of feminist media scholars began applying similar definitions of postfeminism to various media texts. Faludi uses postfeminism to describe the attitude that women simply no longer care about feminism, a perspective she particularly finds evident in news media representations of women’s attitudes toward feminism during the 1980s (1991: 72). Andrea Press uses postfeminism to define the anti-feminist spirit she finds in 1980s fictional

television, suggesting that postfeminism indicates “a retreat from feminist ideas challenging women’s traditional role in the family,” and instead marks “an increasing openness toward traditional notions of femininity and feminine roles” (1991: 4). Finally, feminist film theorist Tania Modleski suggests that postfeminism assumes the goals of feminism have been attained, a discourse she finds in 1980s films (1991). Dow later revives this general conception of postfeminism in her 1996 assessment of television programming from 1970 to 1996. She describes postfeminism as ambivalent toward second-wave goals and achievements, arguing that postfeminism is “a hegemonic negotiation of second-wave ideals, in which the presumption of equality for women in the public sphere has been retained,” while “those [ideals] centered in sexual politics and a profound awareness of power differences between the sexes ... have been discarded as irrelevant or threatening” (1996: 88).¹⁶

It is important to note that Faludi, Press, Modleski and Dow are all theorists writing in the US. Some feminist media scholars writing in Britain and New Zealand understand postfeminism in a way that deviates significantly from the negative valuation of postfeminism evident in the definitions used by these US based scholars.¹⁷ National context does not exclusively define perspectives on postfeminism; however, similarities seem to arise among those with similar histories in the struggle for women’s liberation. Although the history of some other Western countries corresponds with US distinctions of first and second-wave feminism, such labels lose their utility when considering feminism as a global movement and media texts that are not confined by national boundaries. Regardless of specific national experiences and feminist histories, exploring other understandings of postfeminism can be useful in explaining emerging US representational phenomena and in facilitating conversations outside of a US context.

In a 1994 essay, British cultural studies theorist Angela McRobbie slips somewhat problematically from the idea of a postmodern feminism into postfeminism.¹⁸ Key in her articulation of postfeminism is the incorporation of some postmodern theory into the theoretical foundation of feminism. McRobbie advances the need for this new feminism as a result of changes in the subject of feminism (because of poststructuralist deconstruction of “women”), criticism of feminism by black women who experienced exclusion from mainstream feminist movements, and dramatic changes in the societies in which feminism functions (1994: 69). McRobbie notes the fears some feminists have about the potential deconstructive excesses of postmodernism, and responds by arguing that postfeminism “does not eliminate the subject or the self but finds it in operation as a series of bit parts in the concrete field of social relations” (1994: 70).¹⁹ Although McRobbie raises these theoretical concerns in a text exploring popular culture, her contribution is more a definition of postfeminist theory than an applied concept of postfeminist discourse or representation that might emerge in a mediated form.

Similarly, in *The Icon Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism* (1999), Sarah Gamble acknowledges the existence of conflicting definitions of postfeminism, recognizing its use in relation to backlash, postmodernism, and as the feminism of the third wave.²⁰ Much of her entry on postfeminism cites the work of New Zealand based scholar Ann Brooks, who provides the most expansive definition of this variation of postfeminism:

Postfeminism as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not a depoliticization of feminism, but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks. In the process postfeminism facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the demands of marginalized, diasporic and colonized cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms. (1997: 4)

Brooks' definition offers a rehabilitation of postfeminism that is valuable for understanding some developments in contemporary US television series. She argues that postfeminism results from a breakdown in consensus during second-wave feminism in the areas of the political effect of critiques by women-of-color, the way first- and second-wave feminism insufficiently contemplated the issue of sexual difference, and the intersection of feminist thinking with postmodernism, poststructuralism, and post-colonialism (1997: 8). Although Brooks presents a well-developed understanding of postfeminist theory in relation to various feminist media theories such as psychoanalysis, representation, and spectatorship, she does not offer a clear application of how postfeminism might appear in media forms. I use Brooks' definition of postfeminism throughout the remainder of this article.

I present this survey of applications of postfeminism in order to illustrate the contested environment in which the term circulates. The divergent understandings of postfeminism these scholars offer, both theoretically and as applied to media texts, contribute to contemporary confusion over what feminism and postfeminism mean, and beliefs of what their goals may be. The exceptional variation in understandings of postfeminism, definitions that extend beyond mere variation to opposition, illustrates the need for feminist media scholars to adopt a complicated approach in using the term, one that acknowledges the definitional nuances.

Even with a clear understanding of the various definitions of postfeminism established, the need for a less dismissive signification of postfeminism may not be apparent. US popular culture texts are manifesting evidence of changes in feminist theoretical perspectives. These forms may not yet be residual, in terms proposed by Raymond Williams (1973), but they are surely emergent. Arguably, some term is needed to denote these shifts, as representations and discourses distinct from previous, more clearly second-wave liberal feminist versions emerge. Rather than add another modified version of feminism (millennial feminism, post-postfeminism, neo-feminism) to an already complicated feminist vocabulary, postfeminism as defined by Brooks provides a useful term for describing some emerging feminist perspectives.

The perspectives connected with third-wave feminism, one strand of which is postfeminism (as described in note 3), are markedly different from some of the core assumptions found in second-wave, specifically liberal, feminism.

Particularly, the theoretical developments produced by some women-of-color feminists who emphasize difference rather than sameness among women, and the rise of new social movements as less coherent and diversified activist organizations contribute to ushering in a truly revised era of feminist thinking and activism (Patricia Hill Collins 1990, 1998; Angela Davis 1981; bell hooks 1981; Chela Sandoval 1990, 1991). Greater acknowledgment of the disparate understandings of postfeminism by media scholars will better facilitate discussions and conversations about the ways these theoretical shifts begin to emerge in popular media forms. As networks continue to issue characterizations that arguably contain feminist aspects, a common critical vocabulary will aid the ability of feminist media critics to recognize characteristics of emergent discourses and representations.

Currently, the general populace mainly encounters postfeminism in articles that appear in magazines such as *Time*, where postfeminism is ill-defined and the reader is left to assume postfeminism implies anti-feminism, or after feminism.²¹ Indeed, the representations and discourses that began appearing in the late 1990s, which I would classify as indicative of postfeminism, do have limitations in terms of advancing feminist goals, but emphasis on how these characters and discourses do not go far enough denies the gains they also represent. The series *Ally McBeal* and its title character have initiated an exceptional amount of popular discussion about feminism—assessments of its gains and the continued limitations women face. Female characters who are amazingly complex in comparison with previous female characters appear in series including *Ally McBeal*, *Judging Amy*, *Any Day Now*, *Strong Medicine*, and *Sex in the City*. No one character emerges as the unflawed poster woman for contemporary feminists, but this is not an appropriate standard, nor does it account for the internal complexity and contradiction common to television representations and discourses. Feminist theory is beginning to offer tools for understanding the complexity of living feminism in a world full of tangled issues and priorities for women with many different opportunities and privileges. Likewise, the characters and ideas appearing in the widely shared stories offered as television texts also indicate this complexity. Examining the intricacy of these images provides a much more productive route for feminist media criticism than simple categorization of new characters and series as anti-feminist because of character flaws or moments of conservative ideology. Especially when series and characters resonate with audiences to the degree that many recently have, we must explore what is in these texts with an eye to their complexity instead of quickly dismissing them as part of a hegemonic, patriarchal, capitalist system. Admittedly, white, heterosexual, upper-middle-class women remain the norm in many of these series; however, networks that niche market to women (cable networks Lifetime and Oxygen) are offering more diverse images of women.

Toward this goal of advancing postfeminist criticism, I conclude this article by highlighting some attributes of contemporary series that indicate an underlying postfeminist perspective. This list of attributes is not exhaustive. As postfeminist theory continues to evolve, other attributes are likely to arise and some may take on greater importance than they do currently. In many of the series centering on female characters that debuted since, the mid-1990s, the feminist characters and discourses illustrate a revised feminist sensibility. This shift has not been

absolute, but a gradual evolution. Further, residual attributes indicative of liberal feminist ideologies continue to coexist with these emergent postfeminist attributes, a lack of unanimity that is neither surprising nor an indication of postfeminism's viability.

I do not seek to identify series, episodes, or characters as postfeminist, or set up a formula whereby a series/episode/character should be classified as postfeminist, as in if X many attributes are present then Y is postfeminist. Rather, postfeminism is a more useful critical tool when it can be used simply to identify ideas evident in texts, ideas that may be contested internally. Exploring the emergence of postfeminist perspectives in popular media provides a theoretical tool for exploring the complexity of recent female representations and their resonance with contemporary audiences.

Postfeminist attributes

Narratives that *explore the diverse relations to power women inhabit* depict the first attribute of postfeminism in contemporary series. Shows exhibiting this attribute may construct female characters who are complex and distinct from one another despite the commonality of womanhood, as emphasized in the theory produced by some women-of-color feminists. The multiple ways ethnicity, class, education, sexuality, age or generation, marital status, motherhood, and ability position women in society all offer possible axes for illustrating disparate perspectives on female experience and social opportunities. The representation of this attribute emphasizes the ways varied proximity to power structures, such as patriarchy and capitalism, can lead women to experience their subjectivity differently and dependent on context. This attribute illustrates the way that all women, including feminists, do not have the same choices and options, and deviates from liberal feminist discourses focusing on the commonality, or supposed sisterhood, among women. For example, the Lifetime series *Any Day Now* frequently exhibits this attribute in its plots about the challenges to the lifelong friendship faced by its two main characters, Rene, an African American, financially successful, single lawyer, and Mary Elizabeth, a white, working-class housewife. The women often explore the way they experience everyday life differently as a result of their varied subjectivities, and how they hold discrepant perspectives on issues such as abortion, also as a result of each woman's upbringing and identity.

Related to emphasis on the differences among women, be it in their subjectivity or perspectives, postfeminism also critiques oppression or discrimination based on other aspects of one's identity. Postfeminist theory endeavors for justice and equality independent of the reason for inequity, exceeding limitation to factors of gender. This feminist perspective is apparent in the definition of feminism offered by bell hooks:

To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (1981: 194)

Although hooks does not refer to this perspective as postfeminist, it is consistent with postfeminist theory as explored by Brooks (1997) and Gamble (1999). Hooks' definition unquestionably reflects the concern of many postfeminists who develop theoretical positions seeking to understand the ways oppression is experienced as an intersection of prejudices that cannot be differentiated.²² This attribute appears in texts as the critique and exploration of racist, classist, and homophobic behavior.

A second attribute of postfeminism is found in *depictions of varied feminist solutions and loose organizations of activism*. Strategies for activism compatible with postfeminism require new approaches, often those consistent with new social movements because of recognition of the way women are configured with multiply-defined identities that result in different positions of relative power (Nelson A. Pichardo 1997; Sandoval 1991). Discrepant access to power among women prevents the identification of a single foundational base of oppression, leading feminists identifying with new social movements to challenge multiple sites that produce oppression.²³ These varied sites for activism may be government and religious institutions in the case of abortion rights, systems of capitalism and profit maximization in the dismal state of US child care, or patriarchal ideology and governmental policy supporting the privacy of the domestic sphere when a husband beats his wife. Television series may represent this by depicting varied feminist solutions to an oppressive situation, or even varied feminist outlooks on cultural issues. Such depictions may include questioning a structure of power or providing evidence of more than one way to challenge the oppressor. This attribute also includes posing strategies that aid women with different beliefs to understand and respect their differences. For example, an episode of *Ally McBeal* poses both a staff walkout and a legal suit as remedies for sexual harassment.

Third, texts with postfeminist attributes *deconstruct binary categories of gender and sexuality, instead viewing these categories as flexible and indistinct*. Here the figures of transgendered, transsexual, and bisexual individuals illustrate the way culturally created categories including woman, man, heterosexual, and homosexual can be contested. Postfeminism draws aspects of this perspective from poststructuralism and theorists such as Judith Butler (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), and Donna Haraway (1991). This attribute appears in television programming as "playing" with gender constructions, or raising the performative or mutable nature of gender and sexuality. For example, in an episode of *Ally McBeal*, Ally represents a young male transvestite arrested for prostitution, an activity he depends on for survival. The episode establishes a deep connection between the two characters as Ally comes to understand why he does not want her to use a psychiatric defense of insanity. Rather than focusing on his gender play as deviant, the character is welcomed into the circle of the office, and is given a job to fulfill the terms of his probation.²⁴

A fourth attribute of postfeminism is evident in *the way situations illustrating the contemporary struggles faced by women and feminists are raised and examined within series*. These may be explicit topics that are fully debated and negotiated, or simply themes and ideas raised within texts. Although texts exploring feminist ideas have examined such issues for decades, it is the way series handle issues both in the construction of problems and proposal of solutions that indicates a specifically postfeminist depiction. These discourses change over

time as cultural concerns vary. For example, Probyn notes that in the 1980s, the trope of the ticking biological clock received significant consideration in television texts (Elspeth Probyn 1997: 131). One way contemporary series include postfeminist perspectives is by presenting texts that negotiate the connected questions of how to define feminism and its goals in the contemporary era. Other examples might include the way finding a suitable romantic partner is similarly depicted in series such as *Ally McBeal*, *Sex in the City*, and *Any Day Now*, or the way motherhood after divorce is represented in *Judging Amy* and *Once & Again* in comparison with previous constructions of this discourse.

Conclusion

Again, I do not wish to suggest these are the only attributes of postfeminism evident in contemporary US series, but they seem the most widespread and salient. Taking this step toward the application of postfeminist theory to media forms is crucial to furthering discussions about the ways postfeminism appears in media texts. Brooks, McRobbie and Gamble all contribute valuable theoretical work that makes this application in the form of delineating attributes possible. The identification of attributes then aids scholars who wish to apply them in textual criticism, delineate other attributes, or explore such discursive forms and representations in other contexts. All of this work on the forms feminism takes in contemporary US television texts expands the significant research examining the representation and circulation of feminist ideas in media. Feminist media scholarship must adopt new ways to identify and explore textual developments as theorists recognize new ways of understanding relations of power and gender circulating in societies, and the women living in those societies redefine their concerns and priorities.

Notes

1. For example, many feminist scholars located in New Zealand and Australia share a definition of postfeminism very different from the understanding used by many US based scholars.
2. Some of these series are also available to viewers outside of the US.
3. I understand postfeminism as one of three subsets of third-wave feminism, based on my experience in the US. The first subset of third-wave feminism, what I term reactionary third-wave feminism, bears little ideological semblance to the other subsets. This work received extensive attention in the popular media in the mid-1990s as characteristic of third-wave feminism, and includes the writing of women who focused their publications on criticizing second-wave feminism, while still identifying themselves as feminists. This subset includes the work of Katie Roiphe (1993), Naomi Wolf (1993), Camille Paglia (1992, 1994), and Christina Hoff Sommers (1994). A second subset of third-wave feminism is identified in many different ways including women-of-color feminism, third-wave feminism, and third-world feminism, and has used the identifier third-wave longer than any of the other groups. Women-of-color adopted the term to define themselves and their activism against experiences of racial exclusion in second-wave feminist organizations (see Sandoval 1990; Short 1994). Much of the theory developed by women-of-color feminists in the 1980s and 1990s (see Collins 1990, 1998; Davis 1981; hooks 1981; Sandoval 1990) is central to the theoretical foundation of the third subset of third-wave feminism, postfeminism. As

I will expand later, in addition to adopting an emphasis on the intersection of many different identities in defining women's subjectivity, postfeminism also incorporates aspects of postmodern, poststructuralist, and post-colonial thinking (see Brooks 1997). British feminist Sarah Gamble acknowledges each of these groups in her dictionary entry on postfeminism, although she does not organize the relationship between third-wave and postfeminism in the same way.

4. Scholars have, however, read texts produced before this moment as feminist. See, for example, Mellencamp (1997) for a consideration of 1950s domestic sitcoms.
5. An important exception is the series *Maude*, a sitcom set in the home that provides some of the most explicitly feminist discourse ever to air in a fictional series.
6. For backlash, see Faludi (1991) and Suzanne Danuta Walters (1995); for the professionalization of women on television in the 1980s, see Diana C. Reep and Faye H. Dambrot (1987), and David J. Atkin, Jay Moorman and Carolyn A. Lin (1991). These articles consider series such as: *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown*, *Roseanne*, *China Beach*, *Private Benjamin*, *Hart-to-Hart*, *Murder She Wrote*, *Who's the Boss*, *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, *Remington Steele*, *Moonlighting*, *Hotel*, and *Hunter*.
7. See Faludi (1991) for an extensive discussion of these topics.
8. Each of these shows aided the mother's career in various ways, such as the father's working from a home office or employing live-in child care.
9. For an examination of *Baby Boom*, see Mary Desjardins (1992).
10. Lifetime cable network dramas *Any Day Now* (1998–) and *Strong Medicine* (2000–) provide important responses to this history with characters Rene Jackson and Dr. Luisa Delgado, respectively.
11. It is important to acknowledge the dominance of liberal feminism specifically in US television series because liberal feminism has been the dominant form of feminism in US society.
12. See H. Leslie Steeves (1987) for an extended review of liberal and other types of feminism in relation to media study.
13. Rabinovitz's note of "radical social change" is confusing, as it is not obvious whether she is referencing "radical feminism" or invoking the need for more revolutionary social change.
14. A list of female-centered dramas includes *Cagney & Lacey* (1982–1988), *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996), *Sisters* (1991–1996), *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993–1998), *My So-Called Life* (1994–1995), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–), *Any Day Now* (1998–), *Charmed* (1998–), *Providence* (1999–), *Judging Amy* (1999–), and *Family Law* (1999–). Although women have been present in ensemble dramas, or shared center-stage with a man, the dramas listed here are centrally driven by one or more female characters.
15. Also see Judith Stacey (1987).
16. Other US scholars also use a similar definition in article length works (see Helford 2000b; Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg 2000; Walters 1995). Also, Elspeth Probyn (1997), writing in Canada in 1988, explores the conflation of discourses of new traditionalism and postfeminism and applies this to mid-1980s US television programming, defining postfeminism as "after feminism." I emphasize Press, Faludi, Modleski and Dow because their book length assessments afford them the opportunity to more extensively define and explore postfeminism.
17. Probyn notes that "the circulation of postfeminism as a public discourse is a local one—or at least, a North American one" (1997: 129).
18. Based on my reading of the essay, I believe McRobbie intends postfeminism as the terrain of the "postmodern feminist" or "feminist postmodernism." The term postfeminism appears in this context, although it is not specifically defined, nor is it made clear whether it is synonymous with feminist postmodernism, the term she uses throughout most of the essay.
19. Some feminists feel postmodern theory is incompatible with feminist theory because

of the tendency for some postmodern theory to be extremely relativistic, and due to its deconstruction of the subject. Others argue for a carefully constructed inclusion of postmodern theory because of the utility of postmodern ideas that abandon universalistic theories. See the essays in Linda Nicholson (1990).

20. See Anne Friedberg (1993) for more on postfeminism and postmodernism, and Walters (1995) for further explanation of conflicting definitions of postfeminism.
21. See Ginia Bellafante (1998).
22. See Collins (1990).
23. See Sandoval (1991) for an explanation of how this works as an activist practice.
24. The narrative cannot sustain the progressive move of supporting gender play, however, and the episode concludes with the murder of Stephanie/Stephen by an angry John, which could be argued as an indication that the text cannot support this discourse.

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